

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
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R 161304Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9249
INFO AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 4738

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PLO PINS LE SY
SUBJ: EXPLOSION IN FAKHANI AREA OF BEIRUT

1. WE STILL HAVE NO CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE ON THE CAUSE OF THE EXPLOSION WHICH DESTROYED A NINE-STORY BUILDING IN THE FAKHANI AREA OF BEIRUT ON 13 AUGUST. ON THE BASIS OF CONFLICTING STATEMENTS, PRESS REPORTS, AND INFORMATION AVAILABLE FROM OTHER SOURCES, WE HAVE PUT TOGETHER THE FOLLOWING PICTURE OF WHAT MAY HAVE HAPPENED.

2. FOR SEVERAL DAYS PRIOR TO THE EXPLOSION, HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS OF THE PRO-IRAQI PALESTINE LIBERATION FRONT (PFL) HAD BEEN HELD IN THE BUILDING, WHERE THE PLF OCCUPIED THREE FLOORS. (FATAH OCCUPIED TWO FLOORS IN THE BUILDING. THE REMAINING FLOORS WERE APARTMENTS.) THE LAST OF THESE MEETINGS ADJOURNED WITHIN A HALF HOUR OF THE EXPLOSION. VARIOUS PRESS
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REPORTS HAVE PLACED THE EXPLOSION AT 2340 HOURS ON THE 13TH TO 0015 HOURS ON THE 14TH. PRESS HAS ALSO REPORTED THAT PLF LEADER ABU AL-ABBAS LEFT THE BUILDING ONLY TEN MINUTES BEFORE THE EXPLOSION.

3. A FATAH STATEMENT NAMED 10 MEMBERS WHO WERE KILLED IN THE BLAST, WHILE AS-SAFIR STATED THAT FATAH HAD SUFFERED 16 DEAD.

ABU AL-ABBAS SAID THAT 37 PLF MEMBERS WERE KILLED. AS OF 15 AUGUST, WIDELY DIFFERING ESTIMATES OF THE TOTAL CASUALTY FIGURE WERE BEING PRINTED, RANGING FROM 100 TO 200 PERSONS. Wafa STATED THAT OVER 100 BODIES HAD BEEN RECOVERED AS OF 15 AUGUST.

4. ABU AL-ABBAS DENIED PUBLICLY THAT THE BASEMENT OF THE BUILDING HAD BEEN USED FOR THE STORAGE OF MUNITIONS, ALTHOUGH IT IS COMMON IN THAT AREA OF BEIRUT, BUT SAID THAT A PAINT STORE WAS LOCATED IN THE BASEMENT. THOUGH THE PLO FORMED A COMMITTEE, INCLUDING EXPLOSIVES EXPERTS, TO INVESTIGATE THE CAUSE OF THE EXPLOSION, IKE REPORTED THAT THE COMMITTEE WAS "UNLIKELY TO COMPLETE ITS INVESTIGATION SOON."

5. ACCORDING TO MOST BEIRUT PRESS REPORTS, THE BLAST WAS NOT ACCIDENTAL, BUT WAS CAUSED BY EXPLOSIVES PLACED IN THE BASEMENT OF THE BUILDING. SOME REPORTS SAY THESE WERE IN A CAR, OTHERS THAT THEY WERE PLACED AROUND THE BASEMENT, AND YET OTHERS THAT THEY WERE PUT IN PAINT BARRELS IN THE BASEMENT. AFTER THE INITIAL EXPLOSION, WHICH POLICE SAID WAS CAUSED BY THE EQUIVALENT OF 250 KILOGRAMS OF TNT, OTHER EXPLOSIONS OCCURRED.

6. ALL PALESTINIAN GROUPS HAVE DENOUNCED THE BLAST. IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE EXPLOSION, ABU AL-ABBAS, IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, STATED THAT HE DID NOT BELIEVE THAT EITHER ISRAEL OR FATAH WERE RESPONSIBLE. (COMMENT: FATAH CONFIDENTIAL

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HAS BEEN WAGING AN INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN AGAINST PRO-IRAQI PALESTINIANS. END COMMENT.) ABU AL-ABBAS, HOWEVER, WITHOUT MAKING ANY SPECIFIC ACCUSATIONS, INTIMATED THAT THE PRO-SYRIAN POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE-GENERAL COMMAND (PFLP-GC) OF AHMAD JABRIL WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EXPLOSION. (COMMENT: THE PLF BROKE AWAY FROM THE PFLP-GC IN 1976. SINCE THAT TIME, AND THROUGHOUT 1977, VIOLENT ARMED CONFLICT HAS FREQUENTLY OCCURRED BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS. END COMMENT.) ON 14 AUGUST, HOWEVER, AP REPORTED THAT THE PFLP-GC HAD "STRONGLY DENIED" ANY INVOLVEMENT IN THE BOMBING, ACCORDING TO IKE.

7. COMMENT: ALTHOUGH NOT ENTIRELY DISCOUNTING POSSIBILITY THAT EXPLOSION WAS RESULT OF SABOTAGE, WE BELIEVE IT WAS PROBABLY ACCIDENTAL. SECURITY PRECAUTIONS EXISTING IN THE FAKHANI AREA WOULD HAVE MADE ANY ATTEMPT TO PLANT EXPLOSIVES IN THE BUILDING VERY DIFFICULT. DESPITE ABU AL-ABBAS' DENIAL, MUNITIONS WERE ALMOST CERTAINLY STORED IN THE BASEMENT. PRACTICALLY EVERY BUILDING IN THE AREA IS USED AS AN AMMUNITION DUMP. MOREOVER, THE MUNITIONS ARE GENERALLY STORED WITH LITTLE CARE AND UNDER CONDITIONS THAT WOULD PERMIT AN ACCIDENT.

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